The intriguing tale of a D.M. computer firm and the CIA

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A poster hanging on the wall of Dr. Charles Cleveland's office at GMI Ltd. in Des Moines warns against machines causing harm to humans.

Cleveland, a young Drake University professor and businessman who has developed a sophisticated computer program that purports to dig out the basic attitudes underlying a person's spoken or written words, calls the poster a "daily reminder" of the potential abuses of technology.

That stated concern notwithstanding, last summer Cleveland made contact with a branch of the federal government that was interested in his computer program — the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA now refuses to discuss what it had in mind.

Cleveland met at least twice with CIA agents about his computer program, which is known as "Quester." The first meeting took place in July with a CIA agent based in Ankeny. The second occurred a few weeks later, this time with a higher-ranking agent in Washington, D. C.

At the meeting in the nation's capital, the CIA requested more information from Cleveland, 33, who is president and principal stockholder of GMI, which until recently was known as Grey Matter, Inc.

But he and the fledgling company's other principals rejected the CIA's overtures, Cleveland said. Those principals include two Drake colleagues — one of whom is Cleveland's wife — and the chairman of the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota.

There is no evidence that GMI has done any work for the CIA. Its local clients, for which it made computerized market surveys, include Iowa Power & Light Co., American Federal Savings and Loan Association of Des Moines and the National Pork Producers Council.

Just how far the talks progressed between the small computer firm and the CIA is uncertain. Those familiar with the affair offer varying versions of who first contacted whom and what went on. Some flatly refuse to discuss it. And the CIA is mum, except for a string of "no comments."

Whatever the truth, the matter raises intriguing questions because of Quester's claimed abilities, reports about how the CIA sought to apply them, and the discrepancies among those involved.

Quester, which was developed by and belongs to Cleveland, but which is used by GMI, is described in company literature as. a computer program that "measures attitudes of people about organizations, products, services, concepts and situations" and in some instances makes predictions about how people will react to a given situation or what needs to happen before they will react in a given way."

One well-placed source said that the CIA wanted to use Quester to analyze wire service stories prepared and distributed by the nation's two largest news agencies, the Associated Press and United Press International. The source, who was among those who heard Cleveland report on his Washington trip, understood that the CIA intended to expand Quester into helping it "construct profiles of the thinking and attitudes of individual journalists."

The CIA often has had journalists in its bed. Recent revelations about those liaisons led the agency to say it would accept information volunteered by domestic news media personnel but would not put them on its payroll. The CIA refused to accept the same policy for foreign journalists.

Was Quester seen as a method for locating potential CIA informers in the media by analyzing their news stories? Or did the agency foresee other uses for the computer program?

Since its birth in 1947 as a collector and analyzer of data, the Central Intelligence Agency became increasingly dominated by covert operations — involving assassination attempts, mind-control experiments and domestic spying — according to a U. S. Senate study conducted in 1976.

Cleveland commented that because of Quester's nature, "We're in an area where we could be badly used."

However, in two interviews last month, Cleveland declined to discuss the intended purpose for Quester expressed by the CIA representatives he met.

He also contradicted himself on several key points in discussing the matter.

Cleveland said he suggested to the CIA that Quester be used "basically for processing newspaper information coming from other countries."

He indicated that he viewed Quester as a tool to aid the CIA in its legitimate intelligence-gathering function. "Certainly there's nothing negative in helping collect accurate information," the professor said.

Initially, Cleveland said that the CIA agent with whom he met in Washington had voiced doubts about whether the computer program would be worth buying. Since the agency would rather do its analysis "by hand," Cleveland said, there was no reason for further discussions between the CIA and his company.

Why, then, did the agency later ask GMI to send additional information on Quester to a Zip code in the Washington area?

"Like any good organization, they asked for more information," Cleveland said. GMI had been instructed to write to "the fellow we talked to" over lunch in Washington, he said.

Cleveland refused to name the CIA agent. But evidence points to the contact as Joseph Markowitz, who works out of the CIA's Analytical Methodology section.

Cleveland originally was given Markowitz's name by a mutual acquaintance, Michael Leavitt, a computer specialist who works for the Federal Judicial Center in Washington. The center conducts research for the U. S. Supreme Court, among others.

Leavitt, who in an interview said he is not employed by the CIA, acknowledged that during a phone conversation with Cleveland last summer "the subject of the CIA did come up." Leavitt, who was Cleveland's colleague when they were doing graduate work at Northwestern University, said he passed on Markowitz's name to Cleveland.

Why? Leavitt explained that he was familiar with Quester and thought it would be an efficient means for analyzing large amounts of information. The CIA does a lot of that, he said, as do many other organizations, including newspapers.

Cleveland got in touch with Markowitz, said Leavitt. Other sources said that after the Washington meeting, GMI personnel were told to use the name "Markowitz" for future communication.

Contacted last week, Markowitz said he was acquainted with Leavitt, but he denied knowing anything about Cleveland, GMI or the Quester computer program. "I have no insight into this," he said, and directed the questioner to the CIA public affairs office.

Asked if the CIA contemplated using Quester to analyze AP and UPI stories or to construct psychological profiles, CIA spokesman Dale Peterson said he would check. Two days later he said the CIA had "no comment."

The CIA has long been interested in tasks that might be aided by a device such a Quester, according to a former CIA officer who specialized in computer analysis.

A decade ago the CIA had

"technique of developing personality profiles without ever interviewing people," he said.

One of the main goals was the development of "a reliable psychological profile of someone" before the person was contacted by the CIA. The ex-agent said such profiles could be used, for example, to "identify agent material before making a recruitment pitch."

Ellsberg Profile

Similar profiles have been constructed for other purposes. The Nixon White House used the CIA to construct a psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg, the former government official who made public the Pentagon Papers history of the Vietnam war.

Warnings against such abuses were included in the Senate study of intelligence activities.

That study said "the problem in regard to those intelligence agencies with large files of raw data is to ensure that these files are used only in support of the authorized mission of the agency and are not exploited for purposes of improving prospects of incumbent officials in an election, of punishing those on an 'enemies list' and the like."

The unique aspect of Quester is that it analyzes words as "they fall together," meaning in their context, said Ellen Pirro, a Drake sociologist and GMI vice president who is married to Cleveland. Pirro, who has done work for the U. S. State Department on African leaders, recently used the computer program to study rhetoric as a means of predicting future military coups.

Quester content analysis implies that "what a man says is what he is," Pirro recently wrote in an article on political ideas in Kenya and Tanzania.

Quester also can be used in the construction of individual profiles, according to a former Grey Matter officer and computer expert. While it can't construct the profile cold, the program can compare a person with predetermined norms, the man said.

For example, a person could be compared with a politically conservative set of norms and a politically radical set to see where he or she fits according to words he or she speaks or writes, said the former officer, who requested anonymity.

Solicited Business

He noted that GMI has solicited business in personnel recruitment.

And a company brochure advertises Quester's ability to help a company locate individuals "whose personalities, ambitions and attitudes are best suited for certain situations and departments."

Also, Quester "will show if I have certain traits — aggressiveness, for example — and then it's a question of behavior modification, like marketing, for them to try to change me," he said. "That's not to say they can change me, but they'll have a better chance."

Since GMI was incorporated a year ago, the commercial applications of Quester primarily have been in the areas of marriage counseling and market research. Clients have expressed satisfaction with GMI's performance.

Last summer Iowa Power & Light paid GMI $8,500 to survey public attitudes on energy matters. An Iowa Power spokesman said the Quester analysis of words people use is "as close to being purely objective" as anything he has seen. The utility has used the GMI findings in conjunction with other studies to assemble its current advertising campaign.

Commenting on the study for Iowa Power, Cleveland said Quester found that people respond best to the "straight scoop" on energy matters.

In an interview that occurred before the Register learned of GMI's contacts with the CIA, Cleveland said he did worry about the potential abuses of Quester. He noted that the company rejected business from a politician for fear the program could be used to con the public.

Why, then, did Cleveland enter into discussions with the CIA last summer? Cleveland's first answer is startling:

"To get turned down so we wouldn't be bothered by them," he said. Pressed to explain, he asked the reporter if he thought the CIA could be turned down.

"Yes," the reporter replied.

"I think you're naive," Cleveland said. "If the U. S. government wants to use something, they'll use it."

In a subsequent interview, Cleveland said his comment about seeking to be turned down was a "stupid remark." And he offered another reason for the contact with the CIA.

"How Much It Was Worth"

GMI wanted to find out "how much [Quester] was worth," he said, adding that GMI also had made similar inquiries to several companies.

But why the CIA?

"There's no answer to that," Cleveland said.

After the meeting in Washington with the CIA representative, Cleveland had said, the GMI principals "made a conscious decision that we as an organization would not be dealing with them" because "several of our members were damned uncomfortable with it."

Some of the GMI principals refused to discuss the CIA matter with The Register.

Donald McTavish, head of sociology at the University of Minnesota, has worked with Quester with Cleveland and Pirro for years and is a director and stockholder of GMI. He declined to say whether he had rejected the CIA work.

"I'd have to look through my records, and I don't have time," McTavish said.

Pirro denied there ever was a meeting between Cleveland and a CIA representative in Washington.

"I'm trying to get a business off the ground and you're trying to twist it into something it's not," she told a reporter.